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The Land without the Canon Wars:

Language, Literature, and New Freedoms in Myanmar

Landing in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) in February 2013, less than three months after President Barack Obama's historic trip to Myanmar (Burma),¹ I wondered what I would encounter. Serving as the first Fulbright specialist at a Myanmar public university in thirty years forced me to adapt my pedagogy and approach to teaching US literature of the past thirty years. It also compelled me to reconsider the relationships among literature, human rights, and language. Locals who taught English and American literature never experienced the "culture wars" of the 1980s and the expansion of the literary canon. Keats was on the syllabus in every undergraduate English course, and some of my pupils were surprised that Americans no longer enslave Africans.

While English instruction seemed frozen in time, hundreds of sweaty foreigners arrived daily, vying for business opportunities, promoting their NGOs, and "selling" Western values. The younger ones exuded a sense of precariousness, knowing that their ambitions and careers depended on their work. My age peers, including an Italian fabric buyer and a UN minesweeper

¹ The official policy of the US government is to refer to the nation as *Burma*, even though President Obama used the term *Myanmar* during his historic 2012 visit. The government of the nation adopted the name *Myanmar* in 1989. As a political gesture, some in the opposition prefer the name *Burma*, even though it was originally deployed by British colonialists. Throughout this article, I adopt the name used by my students and their faculty--*Myanmar*.

seconded from East Africa, were at once more distanced, possessing a realistic (even cynical) sense of their ability to change the nation, and more present--observant and involved with the people before them.

I was assigned to Yangon University, the top institution in the country, which sets the curriculum for other public universities. Obama's speech took place on its campus, which like those of other universities in the city, had been relocated from the center of the city to its outskirts during student uprisings in the 1980s. Like all Fulbright scholars, I attended special events, such as the first US College Fair in the nation; Black History Month events at the American Center; a meeting of a Muslim women's empowerment group; and presentations at other institutions. On weekends, I led a workshop for up to sixty regional English faculty members, presenting US literature and pedagogical strategies (although most of them taught English language). My primary responsibilities lay with MA students. I met with almost all the second-year MA students at Yangon University at least once to discuss their theses. I also taught about 30 first-year MA students six hours weekly. My focus was on US literature since the closing of the country. Since the greatest changes were the increased focus on women and minorities, I made them the emphasis of the class, moving from an introduction to units on texts by women, African Americans, Latinos, and other minorities, including Asian Americans.

My project overview was succinct: "American literature is not a sensitive subject with the Ministry of Education and thus a good area." This monitory statement struck me as ironic from the first, even as it introduced me to the complexities of my role: to be a "good guest," opening the doors for other US academics; to present literature from a period when texts openly addressed controversial issues; to model student-centered instruction in an institution that still relied largely on recitation and rote learning; to avoid putting students in jeopardy for their

views; and to refrain from replicating colonial relations in my interactions with other professionals. The tasks constantly required renegotiation as the nation changed daily. For example, at the beginning of my tenure, I was informed that interested members of the press would not be permitted on campus, and on my last day, the staff admitted a journalist to interview me on the premises. For my students, the situation was even more confusing: prior to that fall, they had largely been discouraged from engaging with Americans (a police car was always stationed in front of the American Center, its occupant conducting surveillance on those who came and went). Three months later, they were expected to treat an American professor with respect as an authority on material they needed to learn so their country could participate in a global economy and culture.

Rather than summarizing my activities, I will focus on experiences that illustrate the tensions described above, as well as the role of English in a nation that had long been closed to US culture, or at least had hit the “pause” button on its literature, even as the language continued to be studied.

My first encounter with the university was an example of educational diplomacy: a meeting in the stiffest of chairs, in which the Deputy Minister of Education shared his hopes and expectations for the month with me and the chair of the English Department. The penetration of political hierarchies into academia was equally apparent in the fact that one of my hosts was rarely available because officials regularly demanded that she write or translate their speeches into English without any release from her university responsibilities. A US scholar who followed me to Myanmar commented that he often felt as if he had been foisted on his hosts and that they were not particularly welcoming. Such discomfort seems inevitable when hosts are facing a much greater workload than US faculty; expected to accept such guests; and aware of the fact

that the visiting scholar who is welcome today could be banned in two weeks, the relationship damaging the host. Certainly, the lives of the faculty I met were much less privileged than mine. Some lived on campus and went home only on weekends; others faced grueling commutes to apartments where they carried most household responsibilities (English is a feminized discipline there). They were not among the drivers of new imported cars or owners of precious passports that offered access to the rest of the world.

Few of the faculty held doctorates, and those without doctorates had a heavy load of language classes which involved hours of laborious recitation and repetition weekly, straining their voices. Rarely had they heard a native speaker of English, so their vocabularies and pronunciation were limited. The traditional modes of lecture and recitation allowed them to remain within their comfort zones, as opposed to open discussions where they might lack necessary vocabulary. They were instructed to give up their weekends for my workshops at a campus that was far from their homes. Everything they said or did in the workshops would be heard by peers from other institutions as well as the top university in the country, and oppositional ideas could be reported to the government. I was awed by their quiet dignity and persistent efforts, the way one or another of them might show up at the back of my classroom during the week, taking notes and observing.

Students experienced many of the same pressures; however, more in-depth work with literature offered openings for nuanced discussion. In order to generate any kind of conversation, I had to allow students to check their phones for vocabulary. Group work also increased their comfort level, because individuals could discuss answers before presenting them to me or the class at large. But I also adopted strategies to reduce the distance between us and create a safe space for dialogue. For me, it was a lesson in performativity. In a highly hierarchical space,

where students rose in unison when I entered the room, raced to wipe the board, and offered jasmine garlands, I situated myself as a novice to their culture and emphasized the importance of exchange. I constantly learned from the students, as when they offered Buddhist interpretations of Jane Hirshfield's poem "Green Striped Melons," which I had never truly appreciated before and offered up simply to demonstrate that Buddhist authors existed in the US, too.

On the first day, I presented Robert Frost's poem for Kennedy's inauguration and contrasted it to Richard Blanco's piece for Obama's inaugural, showing the many ways in which the poems represented changes not only in literary form but also in the country. This initiated conversation about changes in Myanmar, for instance, the recent reintroduction of Coca Cola and the re-opening of Yangon Technological University. When I presented feminism, we talked about gender norms as cultural constructions, how in Myanmar it is common for men to wear sarong-like garments, how in Chicago, many consider shoveling snow a sign of manliness. Part of the performance was a humorous emphasis on my clumsiness when faced with Myanmar culture—for instance, the fact that I could not wrap the *longyi*, or sarong, or my distaste for pickled tea leaves, a dish associated with women and femininity. I hoped humor would destabilize power relations and engage students as possessors and creators of knowledge. Frequent praise rewarded responses, which for students constituted acts of courage.

Slowly, I began to use literature to open "sensitive" topics. Adrienne Rich's poem "Power," meditates on Marie Curie's suffering from radiation poisoning:

She died a famous woman denying

her wounds

denying

her wounds came from the same source as her power

No one was prepared to compare Marie Curie and Aung San Suu Kyi, long a political prisoner because of her beliefs. My intent was merely to hint at the issue by noting that perhaps they, too, knew of a similar situation. Mary Wilkins Freeman's "Old Woman Magoun" initially shocked students: how could a loving woman kill her only granddaughter to shield her from a predatory male? However, analogies between the story (where the father trades the girl to settle a gambling debt) and sexual trafficking, a major concern in Myanmar, generated nodding. The play "Trifles" by Susan Glaspell led to questions about jury trials, which students had never experienced, but clearly found exciting. Similarly, "The Bean Eaters" by Gwendolyn Brooks generated queries about housing complexes and segregated housing, which in turn led to Fair Housing legislation and additional questions. When introducing Native American literature, it was inevitable that I would mention reservations. Here students were more open, finding similarities with the Muslim internment camps in Rakhine state (this was much closer to the end of my term).

For balance, I introduced texts that illustrated common themes of family and adolescence. Amy Tan's "Fish Cheeks" and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" drew attention to the way young people feel embarrassed or frustrated by their elders' behavior. Students shared the feelings of the elder sister in "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker when they returned from the relatively cosmopolitan metropolis of Yangon to smaller home towns, but they also understood the younger sibling's appreciation for traditional artifacts.

Another node of my work circled around language and language learning. I love Latino literature seasoned with Spanish words and sentences that exclude outsiders like me, sending us scurrying for dictionaries. Pat Mora's "Sonrisas" brought reticent Yangon students to explain how difficult they found their experiences in my classroom as well as to remind me of the extent to which citizens of Myanmar consider mastery of English key to global commerce. They

theorized on the lack of privilege associated with coming from a country whose language has little global recognition and commented on the privilege they would gain by becoming fluent in a language of the dominant, even if it was the *lingua franca* of former colonizers.

The most stunning example of their perspectives on language and power occurred on my last day. Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Arabic" depicts the experiences of a woman of Jordanian descent who visits relatives but cannot speak their language. She is admonished, "Until you speak Arabic, you cannot understand pain." I gave my students the writing prompt, "Until you speak Myanmar [language], you cannot understand...." The responses were mostly predictable: pickled tea leaves, unfamiliar words, cultural traditions. But others referred to more "sensitive" topics, and one wrote, "Until you speak Myanmar, you will not understand freedom."

Increasingly, as I reflect on my experience in the land without the canon wars (where the only MLA style book I could locate dated from the 1980s, shortly after the shift to in-text citations), I focus on the consequences, intended and unintended, of the visit. At the end of term, the professor of literary theory asked students to develop a Marxist analysis of Rafael Campo's poem, "Curandero." The assignment made me cringe because Campo's parents were refugees from Communist Cuba. Clearly, a month's work could not provide the nuances of extended study of the literature of a nation, period, or author. Second-year students who set out to write theses on particularly difficult, dated, or unoriginal topics (such as irony in *Hamlet*), took longer to graduate after I suggested that they refocus or shift their emphasis. While I remain in touch with students on Facebook (officially forbidden), I often wonder whether I created conflict for them with authorities in their lives. The invitation to the Muslim women's empowerment group, for example, led me to a back room at a lawyer's office and yielded an extraordinary conversation on two topics: the similarities between Jewish and Muslim women and the lives of

lesbians. The openness and acceptance on both topics shattered any lingering stereotypes; however, I wondered what the participants encountered if and when they expressed their views at home. Some clearly held nontraditional roles as lawyers and doctors, but another was a student whose family was in the camps in the North and whose sister had been raped there. At another event, a woman literally clutched me and asked advice on her oppressive marriage. I had little to offer except encouragement. Again, I wonder at what cost.

As I conclude this piece, I am conscious that the first elections in Myanmar were held under global scrutiny in November 2015. When I was there, employees of international NGOs jockeyed for a role in preparing for this event, contributing richly to the local economy. The election's outcome was a positive development for Aung San Suu Kyi's followers. The increased freedom that has existed for three years remains tenuous, however; for instance, a Facebook entry mocking the army chief led to a six-month prison sentence for its author. Taking the long view, I must remain ambivalent of the extent of my contribution and whether the language I taught was one of freedom or oppression.

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